

Student Theatre In China

By David Cole

In May 1977 an all-Chinese student cast from North-East Normal University, Chang Chun, performed an English translation of Moliere's *L'Avare* (The Miser). The three performances of the play, which I directed, were the successful culmination of six months' preparation. This article is essentially a chronological account of my experiences. Given the rapid changes China is undergoing, the opportunities for staging foreign-language theatre productions at Chinese universities are becoming easier, and I hope this article will be useful for EFL teachers in China who are thinking of doing the same.

Producing a Play

Many student groups occasionally put on dramatic productions in Chinese, but these tend to be limited in scope, either play readings or excerpts from Chinese or foreign plays. Full-scale dramatic productions, or *huaju* (spoken drama), are a rarity. In fact, the value of extracurricular activities of any kind is an alien concept in Chinese universities. Students are expected to devote their time wholly to their studies. Indeed, students up to now have rarely found backing for setting up drama societies and, as they have told me, they find it difficult to organize themselves. They feel they need the guidance of "someone they can look up to" to get things going—perhaps this an effect of the rigid educational training they have had, which emphasizes the teacher-centered instruction. Most teachers at the university tend to have very formal relations with their students. They too have little time to spare, as they are busy doing extra teaching to make up for their relatively low salaries. Foreign teachers are generally more able to get involved in extracurricular activities.

Soon after I arrived at North-East Normal in September 1996, I declared my interest in doing a play in English. I was approached by a number of students after I had given a drama workshop for staff and students in the English Department. I was not unaware of the problems of putting on a production in China because I had been involved in several theatre productions in my previous posting in Shanghai over the two previous years. I knew that the major problem one always encounters is that there is no central authority at Chinese universities to provide unqualified approval for the staging of a dramatic production. Instead, a person must enter into a complex web of negotiations with officials involving the exchange of personal favors (*guanxi*) to get permission and approval to use an auditorium or theatre for rehearsals and performances. Funding for hiring lighting equipment, costumes, even the theatre itself, can be a major headache. Auditorium guards, or janitors as we would call them, wield considerable power in their personal fiefdoms. Whatever the view of the central authority, they appear to have the last word and their cooperation is vital.

I wanted to do a full-scale production for four reasons. The first and most important reason was purely selfish. I enjoy acting and directing, having done it professionally for a number of years, and I saw it as a pleasant, if arduous, way of spending my spare time.

Secondly, I saw the production as a means of improving the English language ability of students who participated in the production.

Thirdly, I felt that everyone who wanted to participate had to be given a chance to do something, even if they were not particularly good at it. In fact, one of the exciting things in dealing with a group of student actors and technicians in China is that you are usually dealing with untapped talent, so you are the one that makes that discovery.

I wanted the cast to be all Chinese. Previously I had been involved in productions with mixed Chinese and foreign casts, but the danger is always that native speakers can upstage the Chinese, who often show undeserved deference to their foreign co-actors. In this production the only foreigner directly involved was myself, although I recruited several native English-speaking staff to give the student actors coaching in pronunciation and intonation for their parts shortly before we began rehearsals.

Finally, I hoped that enough interest would be generated by this production to give the students confidence to either put on productions entirely by themselves or recruit other foreign or Chinese staff to help them after I had left.

We held our first meeting in early November, and approximately 20 students turned up, all of them English majors. We discussed what kind of play they and I would like to do, what they wanted their contribution to be for the production, and whether they had any theatrical experience. A few had done some limited acting, but for most this was a completely new experience. I outlined briefly what organization and commitment was necessary to put on a full-scale production. Then we decided to meet again when I had selected a short list of possible plays. They gave me a number of suggestions of the kind of play they would like. We decided that I would choose a play but they would have to approve my choice.

In selecting a play, I had to be aware of the following criteria:

1. It had to be culturally not too obscure for both cast and nonnative speaker audiences.
2. The play's language could not be too difficult.
3. It could not be too long—two hours was about the maximum length.
4. There had to be a lot of characters in the play to allow the maximum number of students to have a part.
5. There also had to be a sufficient number of female roles, since the majority of language students are female.

6. The students had to feel "comfortable" in their roles. That is, they would not be expected to do anything on stage which might result in their "losing face."
7. The play had to be able to pass official censorship before it was publicly performed.

Choosing the Play

I looked at a number of possible plays and I decided on a comedy, because I felt more confident with this genre and because serious drama, particularly tragedy, can easily descend into pathos if not performed well.

Finally, I decided on Moliere's *L'Avare* (The Miser), which I thought the most suitable. My reasons for this choice were:

1. The play itself was relatively short and could be reduced further without losing much of its plot or humor.
2. As it had to be translated, there would be no "sacred text" and I could more readily play around with my adaptation. I used the original play, an abridged French version, and an English translation to cross-check.
3. The basic theme of the play, avariciousness, was understandable in Chinese culture, as was the subtheme of arranged marriage.
4. There was no great complexity of characterization, and there was ample opportunity for slapstick humor, which guaranteed plenty of laughs.
5. There were 15 characters with a number of female roles.

The biggest problem the play seemed to pose was the size of Harpagon the miser's role. It would require particular dedication and skill for any actor that took on this part. In the original there are a few nonspeaking parts. I decided to write in some lines for all of these characters and try to increase their time on stage by giving them "things to do" which would either act as a natural backdrop to the main action, or even become the focus of audience attention briefly.

The students approved my choice. Initially we did some play readings to give them the feel of the play and also to enable me to choose a cast in consultation with my assistant director, a female student who was proving to be exceptionally capable as an organizer. All male students who attended were guaranteed a part, but there were far fewer female roles than female students. A partial solution was to give two female students fairly important male roles, and to change the sex of two minor roles to female. Some female students had to be disappointed, though they were offered the chance to help backstage. We ended up with a cast of nine female and six male students, a female assistant director, and two stage managers, one male, one female.

Selecting the Actors

Choosing the students for the roles was exceptionally difficult. One or two students proved immediately to have good voices and acting ability. But I had to discover who might have the potential to take on one of the major roles because the majority of students were inexperienced and unsure of themselves when they read a part out loud. I chose the main character because his face suited the part and he seemed to have a good sense of humor, although his pronunciation needed a lot of work. He had also done some acting in Chinese and was very keen despite the number of lines he knew he had to learn.

In an early session I also gave students a tentative timetable of rehearsals and technical meetings and a list of responsibilities which individuals would need to take on. I also gave them a vocabulary list of theatre terms which I would be using and which I expected them to learn. Since Chinese universities have semesters, and the half-year break coincides with the Chinese New Year, the vacation lasts several weeks. I did not start rehearsals until after the holidays as a long break in rehearsals saps motivation. The break, however, gave students time to start learning their parts. Coaching from their speech tutors began immediately.

Rehearsing

I started weekly rehearsals in March, then increased them to twice weekly, with additional sessions with small groups of students or individuals when I needed to work out trickier sections of the play. On the occasions I could not attend, the assistant director ran the rehearsals. Things did not always run well. Some students had problems with the language, many had to be coached closely on how to move on stage and deliver their lines, and most had problems learning their lines. I tried at first to deal mainly with movement on stage, but I found I also had to deal with more basic problems such as pronunciation, particularly of key words, and stress, particularly contrastive stress.

At first, most students were very self-conscious at attempting any real acting, but gradually they forgot this as they got used to working together. I also showed them by demonstrating myself how I wanted them to act, which also helped in fostering trust in what I was asking them to do. One misconception about the nature of acting on a stage I had to clear up very quickly was that no amplification would be used so we would have to do a lot of work on voice projection.

Learning the Lines

Later, as they began to learn their lines, I began to concentrate on the timing of delivery and the variation in the pace of sections of the play. Throughout we discussed the kind of characters they were portraying and how they saw themselves in that role. I was able to give precise characterizations of the players according to my interpretation, but I forced myself – possibly not enough – to allow the students to develop a character as they saw it if they showed the ability to

do this. I was very aware that I was often dictatorial – but this is part of being a director, and I knew I welcomed clear leadership when I myself was interpreting a role. I did ease off during the last couple of weeks, when students had gained enough confidence to experiment with their role; and I was always ready to try out student suggestions. I spent a long time toward the end of rehearsals dealing with actors who were on stage but not speaking. They needed to be either following the dialogue or busy with some activity without upstaging those who were speaking. I also spent a disproportionate amount of time with those playing minor roles so that they felt themselves to be an integral part of the production. They commented later that they felt this work was particularly valuable.

Ending the Rehearsal

Toward the end of rehearsals, we also had more technical meetings in which all the cast and technical staff were consulted about problems. Specific tasks were also allotted then, such as getting programmes printed, posters made, props and costumes hired or borrowed, music recorded, suitable sound equipment found, and make-up artists recruited. The art department painted scenery, a simple backdrop suitable for all five acts of the play. We had immense problems getting a firm commitment for the use of an auditorium on campus for at least a dress rehearsal and a couple of performances on weekend evenings. We lurched from crisis to crisis as we were promised an auditorium, then were refused it or asked to perform at inappropriate times.

Shortly before the production was due to be staged, a number of staff in the English Department, realizing we were doing an ambitious, full production, used their influence to get us a venue. We found also that more money was now available; we had resigned ourselves to getting the show on stage with virtually no funds. The assistant director and stage managers were invaluable, conducting interminable and exhausting negotiations which for me as a foreigner would have been impossible, even with fluent Chinese.

In the final 10 days before the first performance, I held rehearsals almost daily. It was exciting how suddenly the play began to take shape, how absorbed the students became, and how willing they were to devote all their spare time in trying to reach perfection in voice, gesture, and movement. They became fluent with their lines, so I was able to concentrate on more subtle interpretations of character and on varying the pace of the play to fit the action and unfolding of the plot.

Choosing the Music

Music was an important part of the play. In act one, a prelude was introduced with music as the characters appeared from behind the audience. In the beginning of act three the characters mimed to music while busily tidying up Harpagon's house in preparation for the wedding. Also, at the end of the play, I used a fast rondo by Mozart to allow Harpagon to "dance" off stage. Timing was important for all three and had to be practiced carefully.

Performing the Play

We gave three performances, twice in an auditorium at our own university and once, two weeks later, at another local university. We had an audience of about 350 the first night, 250 the second, and over 400 the third. Numbers were down the second night because we had a power cut, and we delayed the performance in the hope that we would eventually get power. We finally began the performance in candlelight, but the lights came on in time for act two.

After dress rehearsals and the first performance, we watched a video of the performance to look critically at how things could be improved. It was judged a great success. I personally felt it was very good, considering it was done in a foreign language. It was the first time on stage for most of the students. At the university itself it was received as an enormous success because nothing like this had been attempted before and very few people had ever seen live theatre.

The third night was slightly disappointing as the performance was slightly uneven. We expected it to be better as we had worked on improving weak sections of the play. The problem lay in the fact that two weeks were too long between performances, and the students were getting distracted by exam preparation. For this and other reasons, I couldn't galvanize them into getting into the right frame of mind before they went on stage. We had hoped to get to the theatre, quickly organize the set and lighting before we started and then rehearse. Unfortunately we were not able to proceed as planned because the auditorium doors had to be unlocked and we had a major problem with the lighting. I ended up only giving a brief rehearsal of the first three acts. But the audience was very enthusiastic and some sections of the play were better, and all of the technical staff and the two student unions worked courageously to get the theatre ready in time.

What pleased me most about the performances was the discovery of hidden talents. Three of the actors were "naturals;" but several of the others, after two months of rehearsal, showed themselves to be very competent as they gained confidence in their acting ability and fluency with the lines. The leading actor played his Harpagon role to perfection, and the others on stage were affected by this and responded to him. We worked hard on his pronunciation which improved dramatically. He developed the technique of thinking on his feet on stage with the ease of a professional. The only first-year student in the cast grew in confidence and progressed from timidity to loud self-confidence in her use of English and in her acting. For some of the audience she was the favorite actor.

I discussed with the students the possibility of them continuing with dramatic productions in English next year. All were keen to do it but complained they needed "someone like me" to run the show. Unfortunately, they feel that none of them could take over the directing of a play, and they don't know of a Chinese teacher who would help them. I suggested that foreign students of Chinese at the university might like to do a joint production with them to give them confidence. I was told by students of Jilin University that they were about to put on a performance and they were keen to collaborate with our students in any future productions, which might be another possibility for next year. In any event, I have promised some long-distance collaboration and hope to send them play scripts and advice.

Conclusion

To sum up what has been achieved:

1. It was a successful production with an audience total of nearly 1,000, most of whom were Chinese.
2. As well as the actors and my technical staff, a lot of other students became involved in the production, particularly at the latter stages. Many expressed the desire to get more closely involved in the future.
3. A number of students have discovered they have real talent to act. For all it has been a valuable theatrical experience and a confidence booster.
4. Talent has also been discovered in organizational ability and the ability to handle backstage problems.
5. There was significant improvement in students' speaking and listening skills and their confidence to use English as the medium of communication throughout, not just in reciting lines but in technical meetings also. I demanded accuracy in stress and intonation from the actors, and they realized how vital this was for their interpretation of the role they were playing.
6. All participants worked closely together as a team over six months, and this has led to the formation of close friendships. I myself ceased to be treated deferentially as a foreign teacher and I was treated as an equal — very gratifying for myself.
7. Teachers in the English Department were impressed by the production, not only its quality but its scale. They had been unaware what their own students could achieve, even with the lack of facilities and all the difficulties. Further productions should gain speedy and more generous help at the outset. Although it is not certain, I hope that what my drama group and I have created at the university will survive next year with another full-scale production.

David Cole teaches for the British Council at the University of Edinburgh in Province, China.